MUSEUM AND GALLERY STUDIES

THE BASICS

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DISPLAY, INTERPRETATION AND LEARNING

WHAT DOES 'DISPLAY' MEAN IN A MUSEUM OR GALLERY CONTEXT?

Objects are everywhere. In our homes, we carefully select and arrange them on a regular basis, although we think quite differently of the photographs on the mantelpiece, the jumble of toiletries on the bathroom shelf, and the plastic bags shoved into the drawer. In our workplaces, shops, public spaces and supermarkets too, we are used to seeing objects grouped together and presented in certain ways. We know that small items placed on desks are likely to have personal value, those found in the stationery cupboard less so. We know how to scan the department store to locate certain sections, perhaps looking for changes in colour, layout, or even in the height of shelves. We know that a single, spot-lit handbag in the window of a shop is likely to be expensive, without asking the price, and that multiple objects crammed in together are likely to be cheap. To put it another way, we do more than simply 'see' objects in our everyday lives – we are constantly 'interpreting' them so as to infer their meaning, value and significance.

If some of the ways of displaying objects noted above seem reminiscent of the museum or gallery space, there is a good reason: the

ways in which objects are displayed in museums and galleries has directly influenced the display of objects elsewhere. This is often done deliberately to increase the perceived worth of the object in question. For instance, Mark H. Moss (2007: 104) notes that when the retailer Nike began displaying their sports products they did so in "glass cases, with museum-like labels" set behind velvet ropes, hoping that in doing so the trainers, clothes and other accessories would be transformed into "art objects, complete with their glamorous aura". In the case of Nike, this desired-for 'specialness' is not a factor that accrues to an object in isolation, but is at least partially achieved through the way the object is displayed. Display technique, in this instance, is a crucial part of the branding process.

Financial value is not the only thing that museum display strategies convey to us. Think of a period room, such as one at The Bowes Museum shown in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 Furniture in the French Second Empire style, owned by John and Josephine Bowes and used in their homes in Paris in the 1850s and 60s, now displayed in The Bowes Museum.

© The Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, County Durham.

Rooms like this tend to have coloured walls and mix furniture, artworks and other objects together in a way that feels 'authentic' to us – that is, as we imagine they might have been encountered in the past. Here a dining table and chairs are displayed on a carpet in a functional way. By contrast, the Ardabil Carpet on display at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (Figure 5.2), is not only isolated and surrounded by a barrier, but only lit for only ten minutes of every thirty to conserve it (V&A 2015).

Do you respond differently to this second carpet? How might we, as visitors, react to and think about the carpet if it were part of a whole environmental display? What types of difference of meaning, of historical context, and of value and importance are suggested by the two different types of display strategy?

In fact, neither form of display can claim to be entirely 'authentic'. The display in the Bowes Museum, for instance, looks like a private dining room in some kind of historic property – or grand house or even a palace perhaps – left unchanged so that we might 'step into history'. But the Bowes Museum is in fact a purpose-built

Figure 5.2 The Ardabil Carpet, by Maqsud of Kashan. Iran, mid-16th century.

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

museum (not a house), and the room shown in the picture is a kind of 'composite', or stage-set (de Montebello 2004: 11) designed to showcase key pieces from the collection and to give visitors an impression of what the Bowes' home in Paris *might* have looked like. No-one in the past would have encountered these objects in this specific arrangement. Similarly, the Ardabil Carpet was originally intended for a religious shrine in Iran, not a secular gallery in London. It is what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998: 2) would call a "fragment" of an original whole, displayed as if it was an 'autonomous' artefact. Considering both displays together, we can see that through the particular organisation of objects, space and light, one carpet is suggested to be a historical artefact seen in its social setting, while the other is displayed as a work of art to be viewed aesthetically.

As these two examples illustrate, modes of display are a key concern for everyone working in museums and galleries. This is because display is about more than the use of a certain technique or the arrangement of certain kinds of material in a given space. To display something is an act, and the way that museums and galleries display their collections sets up and frames the visitor's encounter, not just with individual objects but with the past more broadly. Indeed, we argue here that the act of display can never be neutral, for it produces particular ways of knowing and valuing objects. This leads us to question again: what and whose stories, histories, ideas and values should curators decide to present and privilege? If display can lend 'specialness' or value to particular types of objects, and indeed types of objects owned by, or laid claim to by, particular social groups, what are the responsibilities of a public museum or gallery? And what happens when we, as visitors, misread their cues, or make sense of what we see in ways distinct from those intended by curators and exhibition designers?

CLASSIC EXHIBITION GENRES

Displays in museums and galleries often correspond to one of a number of classic 'genres', such as chronological, thematic, monographic or national. Each privileges an implied set of stories and each genre has a specific history. Specific disciplines like art, ethnography or natural history may be thought to lend themselves to particular

display approaches more readily than others, although there are many examples where curators may play with these kind of assumptions to challenge conventional ways of thinking about particular topics.

Chronological displays have, aside from cabinets of curiosity and royal collections, one of the longest histories in museum and gallery studies. They are associated with the formation of the public museum in Europe, and the impetus to order collections in a 'rational', systematic way using categories that have a 'universal' applicability. By displaying objects chronologically – or via their date of production – those who worked in museums and galleries were able to situate objects within particular sequences that imply a set of causes and effects in a longer story about types of object, whether that be paintings or social history. In this format, the curator demonstrates, or claims to identify, changes over time and their causes. In the nineteenth century, this process was crucial in fulfilling public museums' new educational roles as agents of 'improvement'. Rooms that had once been crammed with a juxtaposition of objects of all kinds became surveys, sometimes encyclopaedic in scope, displaying 'types' or 'specimens' in sequence.

Chronological displays of this kind remain extremely popular around the world. Yet the kinds of history told by such formats, and even the kinds of time implied in such displays have been subject to investigation. In the 'BP Walk Through British Art' exhibition at Tate Britain, London, for example, the then Director Penelope Curtis rehung the collection focusing strictly on 'real time' rather than 'art historical time' – which tends to group objects by style, theme or movement regardless of when things were actually made (Tate 2013). As a result, Curtis and her team were able to place *Lycidas*, a sculpture often considered to be Victorian (e.g. to 'look like' things made in the mid to late 1800s) in the room dedicated to its actual date of production – in the early 1900s. This meant that the sculpture was shown alongside much more 'modern' looking artworks that were nevertheless made at the same point in time, and so disrupted traditional expectations concerning the 'proper' sequence of art history.

Even more importantly, the concept of time itself can vary significantly around the world (see also Chapter 2). For example, for Aboriginal culture 'the Dreaming' sees time not as a fixed horizontal

line (e.g. past, present and future) but a complex embracing of all three, so that time can be circular, spiraling and flexible. The kinds of historical time traditionally assumed to function between European art museums and ethnographic museums have likewise come under close scrutiny in recent scholarship. It is undeniable that until relatively recently, many art museums echoed a larger story of Europe's perpetual progress, as if one continent was creating the future. Ethnographic museums, by contrast, downplayed change, as if non-Western societies were somehow 'outside' history or 'behind' industrialised ones. There is also the question of the impact of chronological displays more generally, for these can 'call up' objects to support a given narrative, or place them and the visitor on what one curator has called "the conveyor belt of history", denying both their own unique qualities, and more diverse readings (Serota 1996: 7).

Thematic displays – or displays that group and arrange objects according to key ideas, principles, questions or features – developed slightly later in nineteenth century Europe. For Marandino *et al.* (2015: 252) they mark a significant break. While chronological displays might attempt to display an "exhaustive inventory", thematic displays were more selective, choosing a limited number of items that might together, in the case of natural history at least, "illustrate certain scientific principles". Thematic displays thus continued to have "strongly educational goals" (Ravelli 2006: 3) but were designed to appeal to a "wide range of visitors" (ibid.) and not just the scholars and experts who had been museum visitors for earlier chronological surveys.

Indeed, thematic displays continue to be seen as a principal alternative to historical approaches, even being described as 'ahistorical' displays. This is not strictly true – many thematic displays incorporate some chronological element – but they do allow for different focuses. For example, 'The Value of Money' exhibition at The National Museum of American History compiled more than 400 objects from across the world, but rather than arrange these by date, the exhibition tackled key themes including "the political and cultural messages money conveys" and "new monetary technologies" (National Museum of American History 2015). Thematic displays can also be chosen for more practical, or creative reasons.

When the new, purpose-built Tate Modern, in London, opened in 2000, it made headlines for the way it re-displayed its collection. No longer organised chronologically, or with regard to art historical schools, the gallery instead offered four thematic 'blocks' (e.g. 'Landscape/Matter/Environment' and 'Nude/Action/Body') each of which juxtaposed artworks of varying time periods, styles and by very different artists.

For some, this move allowed "continuities across time and space" to be opened up and explored, and for new, exciting and flexible stories and meanings to be created (Blazwick and Morris 2000: 33). For others, it was an opportune way to hide weaknesses in the collection (Alicata 2008). We might add to this that 'continuities' and meanings of the kind noted above often rely upon large amounts of 'cultural capital' (as discussed in Chapter 3), or the ability to 'read' the juxtaposition of artworks via an application of art historical knowledge. There is therefore a danger that thematic displays remain inaccessible, even impenetrable, for certain visitors.

Monographic or *'solo' displays*, unlike chronological or thematic displays, which tend to display objects made by multiple people, present a body of work as authored by a single person or group (e.g. an artist, designer or architectural company), or biographically assemble a collection of objects as associated with a single person or group. Monographic displays tend to be prestigious, and often imply a high status for their creator or subject. A museum or gallery can likewise increase their reputation by staging the first or largest exhibition by or of a high-status individual, or by revealing new work or research (the detail and breadth of monographic exhibitions often allows for the scholarly re-examination of subjects or authors). An exhibition devoted to the fifteenth-century sculptor Nicolas de Leyde at the Œuvre Notre-Dame Museum, in France, for example, sought to "bring together the greatest possible number" of de Leyde's works and led to a reassessment of artworks' attributions, necessarily changing the picture we have of the artist (Œuvre Notre-Dame Museum 2015).

The 'honour' of receiving a monographic show is important, particularly as, in the art world at least, this continues to be divided by media (painting is often 'ranked' more highly than multi-media installations), as well as sexuality, nationality and gender. A report in *Art Newspaper* by Halperin and Patel (2015: 5), for example, analysed

590 monographic shows held in the US between 2007 and 2013 and found that there was a "disproportionate bias" towards male artists, who accounted for around 73% of the total figure. This is important, for prestigious shows do not 'reflect' an artwork's importance or value, but help to construct it – and as the Guerrilla Girls (2005) famously pointed out, "less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are [by] women, but 85% of the nudes are female". Interestingly, Halperin and Patel (2015: 5) went on to note that this bias towards male artists was not borne out in the visitor figure data, leading the authors to suggest that visitors "did not discriminate based on gender". Yet monographic shows continue to be referred to, tellingly, as 'one-man shows', and despite the history of female artists and Feminist art, explicit attempts to create a parity of gender representation are still a reasonably new development. The Elizabeth A. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, for instance, opened in 2007 (Brooklyn Museum 2015), and the Max Mara Art Prize for Women, the "only visual art prize for women in the UK", was established in 2005 (Whitechapel Gallery 2017).

It is also important to remember that although monographic exhibitions are now commonplace, they are a relatively recent phenomenon. The previously popular chronological displays required only one item of each type, for example, and so there was no need to collect multiple objects as created by a single person. Likewise, in the visual arts, exhibitions tended towards the French 'Salon'-style, with paintings of varying genre and by multiple artists covering the walls. Arguably, it wasn't until the 1980s (Serota 1996: 15) that solo shows in art museums and galleries became a "dominant convention".

National displays tell the story or stories of 'the nation', or are otherwise held to be representative of 'the nation'. National displays have a necessarily complex history. As previously discussed, the concept of a modern, European, nation-state only dates from the late eighteenth century. Moreover, the borders of every country in Western Europe changed in the twentieth century. In addition, as we have already seen, the history of museum building is very different across the globe. Thus while the British Museum, which was founded in 1753, claims to be the "first national public museum in the world" (British Museum n.d.), the National Museum of Qatar is, at the time of writing, still being built. There are also a number

of ways that a display might be viewed as 'national'. For example, a display in a museum or gallery of any kind may be explicitly devised so as to represent the nation or some aspect of it, while any display within a national museum – regardless of its content – might be viewed as representative simply on account of its location.

There are also a huge number of international fairs, displays and festivals, including the Venice Biennale, where the artists involved are held to be representatives of the nation that displays or funds the display of their work. 'National' displays such as these thus decide which features associated with the nation, its politics and culture, are to be emphasised or underplayed. Their historical scope can also vary: they can lay claim to long histories associated with territorial space, rather than 'nations' in the modern sense. The distinction is important, for, as Knell warns us, "the emergence of the national museum in different national settings cannot be read as nations doing the same thing" (2011: 6). Great care must be taken when assigning or associating objects, persons or ideas to the nation, not least because ideas of what defines individual nations changes over time.

The classic display genres outlined above are by no means exclusive or exhaustive. A monographic exhibition might well be organised chronologically, within a national museum for example. There are also many other possible genres to consider. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998: 3), for example, distinguishes between 'in-situ' displays that recreate certain settings (e.g. as seen in dioramas or period rooms) and 'in-context' displays, which arrange objects according to a certain frame of reference (e.g. an evolutionary sequence, taxonomy or formal relationship). What it is important to stress, however, is that no genre is a 'natural' solution to displaying any kind of material, nor can it be seen as ideologically 'neutral'. As a consequence, those who work in museums and galleries, or study them, need to be alert to the "fundamentally theatrical" (ibid.) nature of display, and to the potential consequences of their selections.

TELLING AND SHOWING HISTORIES IN SPACE AND TIME

As discussed above, each exhibition genre works to tell a particular kind of (hi)story – but how is this achieved in practice? One of the

key techniques employed here is the manipulation of space, and of our gazes and bodies in that space. Museums and galleries divide collections and objects into volumes of architectural display space, and into certain zones within their buildings. Such divisions can be achieved in terms of discipline or medium, or by the geographical area of objects' producers, their key ideas and/or themes. In other words, through grouping, isolating and zoning objects and ideas, those who work in museums and galleries necessarily also spatially sequence them.

These allocations of space are often based upon understandings of value, so that the collections, key objects or displays deemed to be most significant receive the most attention (e.g. by being placed in prominent or magnificent locations, or because they are given large quantities of space). Each decision can work to suggest or reinforce that value to visitors. As Moser (2010: 25) argues, "displays in large galleries can appear more grand and thus assume more importance and authority", while displays in smaller rooms tend to be seen as "intimate" or offer a "sub-plot within the larger narrative".

Crucially, it is not just the relative amount of space that we 'read' as significant, but the ways in which multiple spaces are organised and ordered throughout a building in order to direct us. For example, The National Museum of Scotland, in Edinburgh, has seven levels, each devoted to a different key period of time and organised chronologically, so that as the visitor walks from the bottom floor to the top they take a 'journey' as if through the history of Scotland from "prehistory to the present day" (National Museum of Scotland 2016). The connotations of 'ascending' are usually positive in the West, so there is a danger inherent in such a scheme that the story becomes hierarchically understood as one of permanent improvement towards the present day.

The way that objects are arranged within a single display can also tell a particular kind of story. The sequencing of objects along a wall, or as arranged through a number of rooms, can create a linear narrative that is meant to unfold as the visitor moves through space. Alternatively, displays that encourage visitors to roam freely between groups of objects place emphasis upon visitors making their own connections, or upon individual objects' own stories, as opposed to a set framework of understanding as created by the museum.

A good example of this discussion can be found in Nicholas Serota's (1996: 8–10) distinction between displays of artworks that favoured "interpretation" or "experience". "Interpretative" approaches are here understood as those that place artworks in historical sequence, so as to "illustrate" a traditional form of art history to visitors. Displays that showed the work of a single artist only, by contrast, are suggested to allow for the visitors' undistracted, personal and intensified engagement with the work, and thus emphasise their "experience" of it.

Even the spacing between two objects, or around a single object, can tell us something. In taxonomical displays, relationships between objects are often suggested by placing things near each other to encourage understanding through comparison. By contrast, when a single object is isolated in space, we are likely to think it deserves our full attention as if 'on its own terms' alone.

In other words, the way we interpret the meanings, significance and value of objects is always 'relational': we implicitly understand objects as being part of a wider world of things. We also understand each individual object in relation to those immediately around it, as well as those we saw beforehand, and those ahead of us on our route through space. It is for this reason that space is never simply the background to display (Hillier and Tzortzi 2011: 283). Indeed the curator Robert Storr (2015: 23) argues that space is "the [very] medium in which ideas are visually phrased". We would add two qualifications. Firstly, all displays, even seemingly static ones, are created in time as much as in space – and indeed, many displays are now interactive and changing. Secondly, 'space' is not just an issue of size or volume; it is not 'empty' but always 'full' of ideas and associations, both implicit and explicit.

WORKING WITH SPACES

Space is therefore an important factor in display, but it is not always possible to manipulate buildings to suit our demands. Other factors can intervene, such as the conservation needs of an object. For example, certain types of objects, like photographs and watercolour paintings, cannot be exposed to high levels of natural light. Large sculptures cannot be made to pass through narrow doorways.

Interactive devices may require power sources, which determine where they must be sited. A large number of other factors, including the size and nature of items of furniture, audio guides, text panels and labels may also contribute to how the overall display can be designed and configured. Seating may be required to provide opportunities for a certain kind of sustained looking and contemplation of objects, or to allow visitors to rest and engage in social interaction. Similarly, required access routes for people with disabilities and regulations about the circulation of people within a given space determine whether or not and where objects can be shown.

Balancing the desired 'content' of an exhibition with the material and physical needs of objects and visitors is one of the central challenges in display. One way of thinking through this challenge concerns the 'route' or 'pathway' a visitor might take within a given exhibition. For example, Manfred Lehmbruck (1974: 224–6) developed a number of 'circulation patterns' including:

> An 'arterial', or circular, pattern, where visitors walk continuously in a fixed path around a space and back out again;
>
> A 'comb' pattern, where visitors move in one direction, but 'zig-zag' via small, optional alcoves along the way;
>
> A 'chain' pattern, which is similar to the above but involves a series of larger, self-contained spaces that might each have their own path;
>
> A 'star' or 'fan' pattern, where there are multiple possible areas for the visitor to explore, each connected via a central area that must be returned to, and;
>
> A 'block' pattern, which is relatively free-choice and can be explored in multiple ways.

As noted above, the selection of any one 'pattern' will greatly influence the way that objects are approached, and understood, by visitors. It may also result in certain practical outcomes – such as 'bottlenecks' when multiple visitors try to get through a narrow space. Indeed, it is not always possible to create a 'comb' pattern, for instance, as the space available within museums and galleries is dependent on the overall architecture of the institution.

The architecture of the museum or gallery is an extremely important feature because of the way it sets up certain possibilities, while closing down others. Architecture has also been a subject of considerable attention in museum and gallery studies because of the way that it acts to convey powerful messages and values to visitors (and non-visitors) even before they step inside. For example, the traditional architecture of the nineteenth-century museum in European societies – and reproduced in many parts of the world well into the twentieth-century – was based on the design of classical temples to symbolise education, authority and tradition. These buildings were typically designed to be approached by an impressive flight of steps leading up to monumental doors (Figure 5.3), thus reinforcing the idea of being granted access to a place of importance, enlightenment and improvement. Today, most contemporary art museums deliberately avoid the 'temple' model of raising visitors up to enter and use a different set of signals – which may appear

Figure 5.3 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Designed 1937 and opened 1941.

© Rhiannon Mason.

Figure 5.4 Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (MUAC), Mexico City. Opened 2008.

© Rhiannon Mason.

more 'open' but have their own issues (Figure 5.4). However, as we discussed earlier, not everyone has the kinds of 'cultural capital' to read such signals positively.

In the case of art museums, the last forty years have seen successive revolutions of what kinds of spaces might be 'future-proof' with regard to what artists want to create. In the 'museum boom' of the last generation, many institutions have expanded or extended their sites. The size of individual art galleries, at least until recently, has also grown to accommodate new types of artwork. Some dilemmas remain. Should gallery spaces be fixed or flexible? Should they offer intimate encounters with artworks or provide grander public spaces? Does art feel more 'at home' in reused buildings, or ones with a patina of age, than brand new ones? Should there be a clear distinction between galleries and other types of space? There is also the question of exhibition design (a field in itself). Should the permanent architecture or the materials in an exhibition be designed to be clearly 'characterful', or to be as plain and neutral as possible?

Figure 5.5 Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Spain. Opened 1995.

© Alistair Robinson.

Richard Meier's design of the galleries at MACBA in Barcelona included both. Rectangular rooms are offset by strange, wave-shaped galleries, whose forms protrude out of the building (Figure 5.5). As this example shows, architecture and design need to be understood as distinct elements of the display-making process, and ones with a crucial impact upon the way that an exhibition is organised and understood (Macleod *et al.* 2012).

WHAT ARE THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DISPLAY AND KNOWLEDGE?

Displays in history museums, but also all types of museums and galleries should never be seen as 'mirrors' that simply reflect society, or as "containers in which to represent truth" (Whitehead 2012: 23). Instead, modes of display construct certain kinds of knowledge and meaning. These meanings might also be unintended. Meanings certainly change: what 'counts' as scientific knowledge and accepted

museum display practice is often contested over time. But the key point here is that museum and gallery staff, through the act of display, play a crucial role in the construction of knowledge and even in knowledge that we now take to be obvious. For example, it might seem 'normal' to display archaeological objects differently to artworks, yet in nineteenth-century Britain these categories ('art' and 'archaeology') were under debate. Museum staff played a crucial role in deciding what each discipline should consist of, where it should be stored, and how each should be displayed (Whitehead 2009).

Similarly, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1992: 7) points out that many types of classification remain flexible and varied between institutions:

> A silver teaspoon made in the 18th century would be classified as 'Industrial Art' in Birmingham City Museum, 'Decorative Art' at Stoke on Trent, 'Silver' at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and 'Industry' at Kelham Island Museum in Sheffield. [In each case] the meaning and significance of the teaspoon [is] correspondingly modified.

Moreover, classificatory schemes can be incorrectly applied, For example, Goodwin *et al.* (2015) recently suggested that 58% of tropical plant specimens had been given the 'wrong' name. In natural history museums, for instance, the idea of a 'natural order' with humankind's place at the 'top' has been challenged in recent years. Aronsson and Elgenius (2015: 2) have similarly argued that national displays do not present fixed, agreed upon ideas of the nation, but rather "create models and representations of nations – their past, present and future". They do this by making decisions about where the boundaries of the nation lie, what and who 'belongs' to the nation, and that which lies 'beyond'. It is also worth remembering that most objects in museums and galleries began their lives outside of the institution, and that the act of collection might significantly alter their meaning and value. For example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that 'ethnographic objects' only become ethnographic objects when they enter the museum (1998: 2–3).

Display, in this light, is always politically and ethically charged, and potentially fraught, for "every aspect of a museum, gallery or heritage site communicates" (Mason 2005: 200). Yet despite the long

history of such debates about the very serious implications of displays, certain modes of display are still commonly thought of as normal, or as presenting 'facts'.

THE GALLERY AS 'WHITE CUBE'

'White cube'-style modernist galleries are of particular interest to any discussion of the power of display, because they were originally designed to present artworks in isolation. All visual and textual 'cues' (i.e. large gold frames around artworks, coloured walls, furniture, or even the close proximity of other artworks) were stripped away, and visitors were thought to be able to now experience artworks more directly, and without interference. As the art critic Brian O'Doherty (1976: 15) famously pointed out, white cube galleries were spaces where

> the outside world must not come in, so the windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. The wooden floor is polished so that you click along clinically, or padded so that you pad soundlessly, resting the feet while the eyes have at the wall. The art is free, as the saying used to go, 'to take on its own life'.

As an important part of this, and particularly after the Second World War, 'white cube' style art galleries also presented artworks without labels or wall texts, considering these to be too 'didactic', or directive of the visitor's attention. Such ideas remain influential. Some artists and even some curators continue to resist 'imposing' labels on, or nearby, artworks, believing that this practice prevents the artwork from 'speaking for itself', or distracts attention away from the work (Figure 5.6).

Yet, as academic Christopher Whitehead (2012: xi–xvi) argues, there is no such thing as 'no interpretation', even when text is absent. Rather, interpretation includes "everything which precedes, surrounds and follows its [an object's] production and consumption" – or in other words, everything we have discussed thus far, including the space, furniture, colour of walls, as well as everything a visitor reads, feels and understands (or does not) before visiting. All displays, even those without text, 'frame' objects in particular ways.

Figure 5.6 Tate Modern: Interior gallery with visitors.

© Tate, London 2009.

This is particularly important in the case of the white cube, for, text aside, it has been argued that the style of display selected does *not* present objects without interference. Rather, white cube-style displays make a deliberate choice to isolate objects from the 'real' world, its conflicts and contests, and thus actively conceal "all social, gender, religious [and] ethical differences in the name of aesthetic autonomy" (Weibel 2007: 139). As a result, white cube-style displays have a tendency to 'consecrate' objects, as though they were religious icons, prompting silent and reverential behaviour similar to that of a church's chapel (Serota 1996).

This is key, for while the white cube style of display remains a popular choice for artworks worldwide, it actively transforms the way we understand, and respond to, artworks. More recently, artists' use of projected images has demanded all natural light be excluded from galleries as in a cinema, with this style being named a 'black box' mode of display (Figure 5.7).

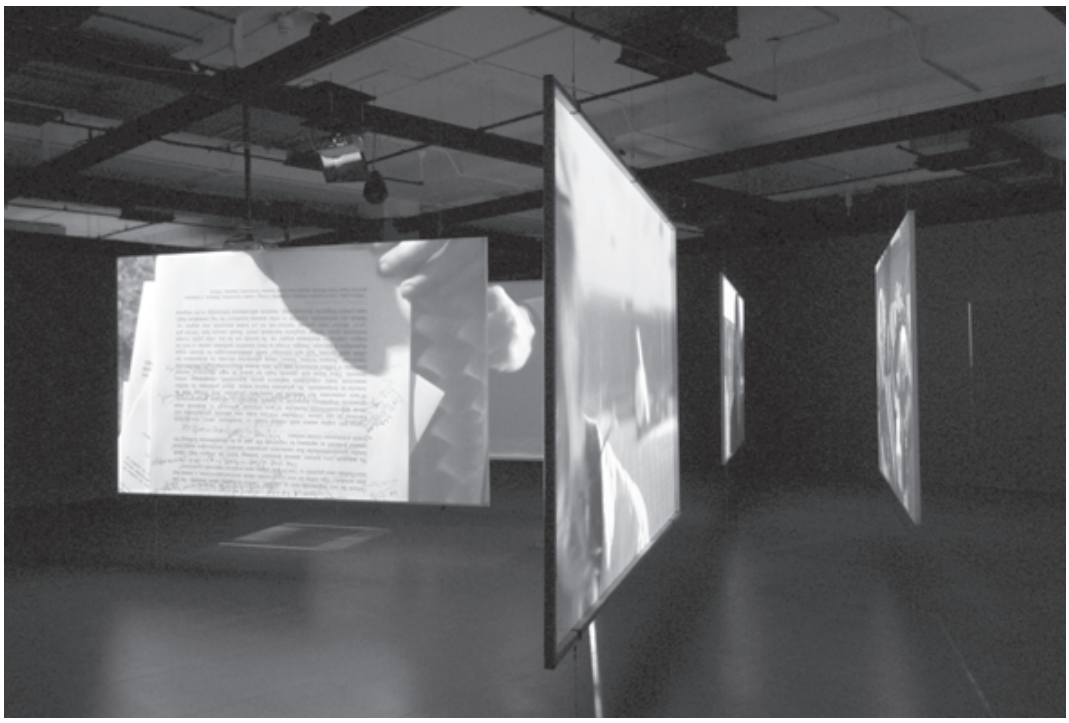

Figure 5.7 Installation at Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art (NGCA), Sunderland, 2006.

© Colin Davison/NGCA.

THE 'POETICS' AND 'POLITICS' OF DISPLAY

Given the relationship between the act of display and the construction of knowledge it is important that in the museum sector we develop tools and techniques to interrogate displays of all kinds. In New Museology, discussions of this kind are often centred around two interconnected terms: the 'poetics' and 'politics' of display. Both terms are taken from the Smithsonian Institution's international conference in 1988 addressing 'The Poetics and Politics of Representation' (Stam 2005: 57).

The poetics of display was first defined as the "underlying narrative/aesthetic pattern within exhibitions" (as quoted in Weil 2004: 77). It has also been understood as "the practice of producing meaning through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related components of an exhibition" (Lidchi 1997: 168). In other words, the poetics of display concerns the creative decisions about how objects are grouped, ordered and linked together, as though

objects were individual words and the curator a writer telling a story and stimulating thoughts and feelings in doing so.

The politics of display was first defined as "the social circumstances in which exhibitions are organised, presented and understood" (quoted in Weil 2004: 77). This is understood to concern the role and power of the museum in relation to how 'knowledge' is constructed. Politics is always a question of who benefits. Who is being addressed? Who is expected to be paying attention and who not? Who materially owns the objects? And who 'owns' them psychologically, that is, identifies with or lays claim to the stories they tell?

To give an example: the practice of displaying indigenous people in museums, fairgrounds and World's Fairs was extremely common well into the twentieth century. One of the most famous instances of this concerns a woman who became known as Sara Baartman or the Hottentot Venus. Born in South Africa in 1770s, Sara Baartman was apparently persuaded into agreeing to come to Britain in 1810 where she was publicly displayed in universities, society parties, and museums as a curiosity because of aspects of her unusual anatomical condition (Crais and Scully 2009). Her buttocks and genitalia were considerably larger than usual. This was seen at the time by some to be evidence of the racial theory that people of African descent like Sara were more 'primitive' than European peoples, more sexualised, and half-way between animals and humans. Accordingly, Sara was exhibited in provocative clothing and later ended up with an animal exhibitor in Paris (the 'poetics' of display). She was routinely examined by scientists, academics and anthropologists, and 'objectified' by being treated as an object of enquiry and knowledge rather than as a human being (the 'politics' of display).

After her death, Sara Baartman was dissected by Cuvier, Napoleon's surgeon who pickled her brain and genitalia, made a cast of her body and wired up her skeleton for display. Baartman's remains were put on public display in the Musee de l'homme in Paris until 1974 when they were removed and put into storage. In 1994, Nelson Mandela petitioned the French government to return Sara Baartman to her homeland, South Africa. The request was initially resisted on the grounds that it might pave the way for more repatriation requests and that her remains were important for study. The request was eventually accepted by the French government

and in 2002 Baartman was flown back to South Africa on National Women's Day for a state burial in a grave with a commemorative plaque. The President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, made a speech at her funeral.

The case of Sara Baartman makes very clear the interrelation between the poetics (the manner in which she was displayed) and politics of display (the power to claim ownership of her), and the need to interrogate both. It also demonstrates that display "not only shows and speaks, it also does" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 6). On this account, we need to ask questions, both of the past and the future. For example, almost every museum professional in the world now agrees it is entirely unethical to display living people as 'specimens'. But what instances of the poetics and politics of contemporary display will our successors see in a similar way?

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY?

Many of the examples presented in this chapter (and throughout this book) require us as academic and as professionals in the museum world, to ask difficult questions and consider difficult choices. But to what extent might an individual be required to take public responsibility for a given display? One way of looking at this is to consider the 'exhibition as argument'. For example, we might argue that every display is a proposition. In each profession and field (whether art or social history) there are different 'positions', each competing for status, attention and resources. To become recognised in a museum profession, you have to take a stance on a key debate of the day, or persuade others to think about a whole new argument. In doing so, all exhibitions inevitably "assert some truths and ignore others" (Lavine and Karp 1991: 1). There is also the matter of selection. Even the mere inclusion of an object within a display suggests that that it should be valued highly: inclusion promotes the work of its creator. In this sense, all displays are a call for others to agree with the valuation made by the curator.

However, as Macdonald (1998: 1) highlights, displays are usually presented as "unequivocal statements rather than as the outcome of particular processes and contexts" and "assumptions, rationales,

compromises and accidents [are] hidden from public view". Thus, for example, until very recently many museums' texts were anonymous, and couched in an 'institutional', collective voice. This can be beneficial. For example, a recent survey suggested that museums and galleries in Europe continued to enjoy high levels of public trust, and that visitors wanted to "find out factual and unbiased information" without being told "what to think" (BritainThinks 2013: 6). So should the museum continue 'as normal' to avoid jeopardising this trust, or is there a need to make clear whose agency is at stake in creating a display by encouraging curators to identify themselves as authors?

This option is explored by David Dean (2005: 196–7), who believes that museum curators should personally 'sign' exhibitions, so as to treat the visitor as a "thinking being, someone worthy of taking the effort to inform fully". We have seen interesting examples of this in museums over the years. One such attempt was at the Museum of London at the entrance to its prehistory gallery and was on an interpretation panel entitled: "Politically Present and Correct?"

> This gallery is a reflection of our present. We have chosen to humanise the past by focusing on specific sites and the needs of individual people, and by giving greater prominence to green and gender issues. How will this standpoint be judged in the future? What do you think?
>
> (J. Cotton and B. Wood, Curators 1994)

This example was striking because it was unusual. The practice of naming curators as authors of exhibitions tends to be more commonly seen with temporary exhibitions, and arguably is more prevalent in the contemporary art gallery context than in other kinds of museums. Yet even here, permanent collection displays tend not to 'name' those involved. In this respect, Tate Modern, in London, is unusual. Every room of the permanent collection displays features an authored text that lays out the rationales behind individual curators' choices. Such an approach is still uncommon in most museums and galleries, and even when deployed, is not without its shortcomings. For example, while curators may now expect to have temporary exhibitions credited to them personally, the relatively recent emergence

of the 'star' curator has caused some difficulties. Artists have refused to exhibit work they considered to be subordinate to the curatorial 'thesis' (Green and Gardner 2016: 34), leading many curators to downplay their own role for fear of a backlash.

COPRODUCING DISPLAYS AND SHARING AUTHORSHIP

The recognition that visitors actively participate in meaning-making processes has led to calls for visitors to become directly involved in the production of displays, or to inform and shape them. As explored in Chapter 3, the practice of participatory work and coproduction is increasingly popular in some areas of museum work, particularly in social history and community museums. In terms of the development of displays and exhibitions, participatory practices can be used to help generate themes or content. Oral histories, digital stories, film and photography are popular methods employed to incorporate audience perspectives, although this material is not always given the same status as the traditional material. The introduction of new material of this kind also speaks to another trend of recent years which is the effort by museum staff to incorporate multiple voices and contrasting perspectives. This signals an attempt to move the museum away from presenting a single, monological voice and towards poly- or multi-vocal displays.

In particular, some museums actively draw our attention to the question of self-representation and what has been described as "the problem of speaking for others" (Alcoff 1991). One of the critiques often levelled at traditional museums has been that they spoke for and about others who were themselves denied a voice within society and within its public cultural institutions. In postcolonial societies museums have often been the subject of efforts by indigenous people to change this situation and to gain the opportunity to speak on their own behalf and terms. In some cases this has led to a questioning of the traditional, institutional, anonymous and singular voice of the museum.

In certain displays it has also resulted in an approach to telling history which foregrounds competing truths. For example, in

a display about treaties between the US government and Native American people at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, the display was organised around the perspective of the two parties presented in each text panel side by side: the Native Americans and the US government. The effect was to throw the disparity between the two accounts of history into sharp relief, to prompt the visitor to measure one against the other, and to recognise that within one country there can be acutely contrasting accounts of their shared history. History in such museums is not represented as consensual, settled or closed but as disputed, deeply unsettled, and open to debate.

This poly-vocal approach to interpretation is not confined to museums about indigenous peoples or colonialisation; it can be found more widely as part of new museological thinking and community-based museum work. It has also been put to use in other museum contexts where history is far from consensual and where a single interpretation would be politically unacceptable to communities.

One such example was developed by the Tower Museum, Derry/Londonderry, in Northern Ireland. The museum created a display relating to the period between 1968 and 1998 known as 'The Troubles' which saw violent conflict over the constitutional status of the territory of Northern Ireland (Figure 5.8). In brief, the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland wished to remain part of the United Kingdom, whereas the Catholic minority wanted to leave the United Kingdom and become part of the Republic of Ireland. In the context of this deeply divided society, any attempt at representing a single historical account has highly problematic. As a result, the museum interpretation of events was organised to show both Catholic and Protestant perspectives facing each other on opposite sides of the display. In this way, the museum visitor was prompted to acknowledge the existence of radically opposed accounts of the two sides' shared history. At the same time, the museum was able to provide public recognition of the two different accounts and to create a role for itself as a 'safe space' in which both sides could find resonance. Out of this context, some museums in Northern Ireland have come to play an important social role of reconciliation.

Figure 5.8 'The Road to Partition' Gallery showing different coloured kerbstones on either side.

© Tower Museum Derry/Londonderry.

CAN OBJECTS 'SPEAK'?

Up to this point, the process of creating a display has been discussed from a particular vantage point. We might sum it up like this: those who work in museums and galleries create meaningful displays by selecting, arranging and interpreting objects. In fact, whole teams of people decide which stories objects might tell, and they make objects 'speak' through their contextualisation within the display technologies, material categories and systems of knowledge museums create and embody. This process brings objects 'to life'. It is worth thinking about why museums principally show and collect *inanimate* objects. Tate Modern claims that its 'Tanks' spaces are the first museum spaces dedicated to performance, that is, to showing animate human beings rather than inanimate artefacts (Tate 2012).

Yet, the idea that objects can 'speak' is not as strange as it might first sound. As we have seen above, the idea that artworks can (and should) 'speak for themselves' remains popular. Museum visitors often tell us that certain objects and materials caught their attention, and 'spoke' to them, at times in quite unanticipated and exciting ways. Indeed, one reason museums exist is because we 'invest' so much in material objects, through imagination, or memory. Objects can prompt us to think about past, current and future events around the world, as well as in our own lives. It is perhaps for this reason that we commonly employ objects to 'speak' for us to show others what kind of person we are and what groups we belong to or identify with. Objects tell others, and remind us, what ideas and values we hold. For Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten F. Latham (2014: 13), it is this ability of an object to act as a conduit or "mediator" between people and ideas that is so important for museums and galleries. In what they describe as the "networked museum", objects act as a point of exchange between visitors and professionals (ibid.: 18) and a means to open up new ways of thinking about the world.

And yet objects can also be intractable, both physically and intellectually, resisting being contained within particular readings or settings. For example, while those who work in museums and galleries might suggest or even create meaning through objects, they can hardly make them do or stand for anything they like. Visual and textual narratives need to convincingly illuminate an aspect of the

object, seen or unseen – its appearance, history, use or context – or they place the authority of the museum or gallery at risk. Conversely, objects can provide evidence about and act as 'witnesses' to events from times or places out of sight or out of mind, and begin to make stories about them powerful and palpable.

Recent intellectual developments have developed this line of thinking, and argued that objects have a power, and agency, of their own. This approach, which is potentially very productive for museums and galleries, considers objects as akin to people: as capable of action and effects in the world. One particular strand of this development, as discussed in Chapter 2, involves thinking of objects' 'biographies', 'careers' or their 'social lives': tracing the places they pass through, their ownership or use, or roles in the world. This sometimes involves seeing the world as if from the object's 'point of view'.

Theories such as 'object-oriented ontology' go much further and propose that objects are 'actors' themselves in their own right. For example, what the theorist Jane Bennett (2010: viii) refers to as "the vibrancy of matter" demonstrates how "things" not only impede human design but act as "quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities or tendencies of their own". As an example, Bennett describes a power black-out in North America in 2003 that eventually affected 50 million people. She argues that various components within this power grid, such as generating plants, circuit breakers and fans, together accidentally caused a change in the flow of electrons, which led to the eventual overloading of the system and a cascade of generators (including twenty-two nuclear reactors) shutting themselves down (ibid.: 25). In other words, the blackout was not caused by human action (or error), but by a series of interacting, non-human devices. What then, are our objects, environmental devices, computer systems, and other 'things' up to in the museum?

MAKING SENSE OF WHAT WE SEE: THE ACTIVE VISITOR

Objects are not the only things to behave unpredictably in the museum. Despite the very best efforts of those who work in

museums and galleries, visitors too can respond to displays in a variety of surprising, and even at times unwelcome, ways. Leinhardt and Knutson (2004: 16–17), for example, report hearing a conversation between three "conscientious" teenagers at the 'Africa: One Continent, Many Worlds' exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of National History, in the United States. The teenagers had spent some time engaging with the exhibition, but nevertheless got it "just about as wrong" as they could have – mistaking African items for Southwest Indian dream catchers, and remarking that "Africans don't get a lot of wars" and that Africa had no major government or technology.

Leinhardt and Knutson's example underlines a key point: the act of display is powerful, but it is not the whole picture. Indeed, part of the challenge for those who work in museums and galleries is that "the meaning and significance of any object is fundamentally unfixed" (Wood and Latham 2014: 11). There might be certain associations that are shared across a culture, but we bring our own memories, perspectives and assumptions as well. And as we saw in Chapter 3, visitors do not arrive at the museums or gallery as 'empty vessels' waiting to be filled with information, but instead bring a wide variety of motivations, requirements, past experiences, ideas and values to bear upon the visit. In other words, visitors actively construct meaning for themselves.

One approach to understanding how visitors make sense of what they encounter in museum and art gallery displays is the idea of 'entrance narratives'. This idea was developed by Doering and Pekarik (1996) on the basis of research they undertook at the Smithsonian Institution in the USA. They developed the term 'entrance narratives' to describe three interdependent components:

- A basic framework i.e. a fundamental way that individuals construe and contemplate the world
- Information about the given topic, organized according to that basic framework
- Personal experiences, emotions, and memories that verify and support this understanding.

(Doering and Perkarik 1996: 20)

Based on this model they argue that "the most satisfying exhibitions for visitors will be those that resonate with their experience and provide information in ways that confirm and enrich their view of the world" (Doering and Perkarik 1996: 20). This raises an important conundrum. According to the 'entrance narrative' theory, visitors will enjoy or seek out exhibitions and display that affirm their existing way of seeing the world. Because of what is described as 'confirmation-bias' – in other words, that you tend to only see what you expect to see – visitors may not even notice where museums and galleries are saying something different, unless that difference is made really explicit. At the same time, some museum and gallery professionals now say that they want visitors to be challenged, encouraged to think and to engage with debates about contemporary issues that show alternative perspectives.

Another way of looking at this issue is to consider what Cheryl Meszaros (2007: 17–18), has called the "reign of 'whatever' interpretation". Meszaros describes here a "bizarre contradiction" whereby some museums and galleries spend large amounts of money on crafting a particular story through display, but simultaneously "champion the idea that an individual's personal interpretation is the best result of the museum encounter" – even if this has nothing to do with, or even directly contradicts, the intended message. Clearly, not all museums and galleries do this, but Meszaros's point is insightful. How can museum staff engage and support visitors, while making specialist knowledge available and accessible to them, but without providing set 'answers'?

Debates of these kinds have prompted a shift in the ways many professionals think about their institutions' very purposes. Should museums and galleries be didactic and aim to show or tell the visitor things? Or should they be discursive and aim to engage with (or respond to) their visitors? On the one hand, encouraging visitors to interpret displays on their own terms may bring to light fresh perspectives or 'hidden' personal histories. It also opens up an opportunity for all visitors to engage with the museum on an equal footing, and for the visit to be personally meaningful and memorable. On the other hand, surely museums cannot champion any and

all meanings generated by visitors? Or fail to encourage visitors to 'see' the world differently? How these two contrasting approaches can be reconciled is still open for debate.

VISITOR BEHAVIOUR IN GALLERY SETTINGS

A similar point might be made about the unpredictability of visitor behaviour in a gallery space. When we teach our museum and gallery students about display, we always send them into exhibition spaces to watch visitors – with the institutions' and visitors' permission. We tell them to watch what visitors do, how they behave, what routes they follow, what they pay attention to and how much they read. We ask them to sketch out a floorplan of the space and then track visitors' movements in the space, and to keep a time-log of their activities. Then we ask them what they found out. Their first response is typically one of shock and disappointment. They report that visitors do not spend nearly as much time in the exhibitions as they expected they would, and don't read everything 'properly'. Our students expect visitors to behave as they would – with keen interest and attention to detail – but for visitors the trip is much more likely to be a casual leisure activity. This does not mean that visitors are getting it "wrong" or not paying enough attention. It does mean that it is crucial to recognise that people will behave differently according to their own motivations, expectations and preferences.

This exercise is useful because it opens the students' eyes to a whole other way of thinking about visitors, interpretation and display; that of the user's perspective. This is a significant area of study; too large to cover fully here. However, we can give a few pointers to illustrate key issues. The first thing to say is that visitors typically do not faithfully follow the routes suggested by curators and designers, unless the design of the space forces them to do so (in other words if there is only one way to go around the space to get out, as in what we could call an IKEA-style layout). Although it depends on how the space is laid out and how explicitly various

routes and narratives are signposted, on the whole, visitors tend to follow their own interests. We know, for example, that visitors tend to browse and graze. They do not spend equal amounts of time in all areas; they may spend longer at the outset but then speed up or slow down again. They read selectively, dipping in and out of text panels, and will tend to focus when they find something that catches their attention.

Visitor behaviour will also differ depending on whether the visitors are alone, with friends, with children, with elderly people, with little or a lot of time, whether it's their first visit or a repeat trip, whether they plan to come back or whether this is a one-off visit not to be repeated. It appears to make a difference to the length of the visit whether visitors have paid and how much, or whether it was free; it has been suggested that free admission in the UK has led to more visitors coming more frequently but for shorter visits. Presumably this is because when visitors pay there is a strong sense of needing to spend time in order to get value for their money. As one might expect, visitors' behaviour in the space and their engagement with the display depends greatly on whether they know a lot about the subject or whether they are novices. Either way, spending time in an exhibition watching how people move through the space is undoubtedly the best way to begin to understand how displays function, and how visitors do and don't behave as might be expected by professionals or researchers.

FROM 'EDUCATION' TO 'LEARNING'

The recognition that visitors actively – and at times unpredictably – engage with displays has prompted another major change in the way that we think about museums and galleries, known as the shift from 'education' to 'learning'. To go back in time very quickly: museums and galleries in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe aimed to 'impart' information as a "means of public instruction" (McClellan 2003: 5). In this model, museums and galleries were thought to control and distribute a sanctioned and stable form of knowledge, and visitors 'acquired' the exact same knowledge by looking, reading and acting as they saw others do. But we know that visitors don't

behave and respond like this. Rather, visitors bring their own experiences and ideas to bear upon the visit, and each visitor might 'take away' very different messages and understandings.

As a result, a number of academics and practitioners began to rethink the traditional 'educative' approach in the museum, and its linear model of knowledge transmission. Drawing upon educational theory, for example, George E. Hein (1998: 156–7) proposed the concept of the "constructivist museum", which argued that it was "not only difficult but almost impossible to learn something without making an association with familiar categories". Falk and Dierking (1992: 1) developed the "Interactive Experience Model", which conceptualised museum and gallery visits as involving three contexts: the personal, social and physical, while more recently, Simon (2010) has advocated for "participatory institutions", with museums and galleries as 'platforms' for coproduced activities and experiences (as discussed in Chapter 3). Many more ideas are available, but the key point here is that 'learning' in the museum and gallery is now commonly understood as an active, complex and social process, and one that might challenge, or pay no attention to, the authority of the museum. The emphasis placed upon learning has also significantly increased over time. In many parts of Europe, the US and Australia, for example, learning is now "a core purpose of museums" (MLA 2004: 24), and funding allocations have similarly increased to support this work.

Yet it is worth pointing out that there is no fixed thing that is 'learning' (Saljö 2003: 621) that we might find or test for in the museum. Rather, both 'education' and 'learning' are human attempts to define and understand what people think and do, why, and how this might change over time. Moreover, the way that individual museums and galleries decide what 'learning' is, whom it is for, how it might be encouraged or evaluated, and their overall purpose as a 'learning space', varies considerably. As a result, staff in a learning department might find themselves responsible for school trips, or adult classes and events, or family workshops, or drop-in handling sessions, or 'outreach' and engagement work (as discussed in Chapter 3). They might produce resources in varying forms (e.g. podcasts, videos and text documents), or write wall texts and access

policies. Learning staff might equally have responsibility for visitors with specialist needs, for teams of volunteers, or for the 'professional development' of staff – or any combination of the above.

What we see in the above then is the opening up of a complex and multifaceted field of practice, and one that increasingly blurs 'traditional' responsibilities between display, interpretation and learning. Indeed, the recent turn towards 'socially engaged' artistic practice adopts methods and approaches commonly thought of as 'educative' – that is, socially engaged artists do not present objects for display, but rather focus directly on processes of discussion, collaboration and engagement. This is a new and important challenge for those who work in museums and galleries as they try to work out how best to benefit from varied kinds of expertise, what kind of museum or gallery they want to provide, and for whom.

CREATING ACCESSIBILITY FOR EVERYONE

We have argued throughout this chapter for the crucial importance of widely accessible interpretation, learning and display strategies if museums and galleries are to be for everyone, and not just a select few. However, we know from our own experience that this is easy to say, but can be very difficult to put into practice.

Give it a try yourself. Imagine you are responsible for the redevelopment of a collection of renaissance paintings, dating from around the fourteenth to sixteenth century. You want to make these paintings accessible to all your visitors, and not just those who already "possesses the cultural competence" or "code" (Bourdieu 1984: 2) that allows them to respond "correctly" to the symbolic and cultural cues the museum currently presents (Duncan 2005: 81). Amongst these paintings is a work by the Italian artist Sandro Botticelli (circa 1445–1510) called *The Annunciation* (Figure 5.9). It depicts a religious scene, and is famous for its use of mathematical perspective. It is also almost a metre long, includes gold leaf, and was once hung in a church in Florence but is now in the collection of the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow, Scotland (Glasgow Museums 2008). The published description of this painting is: "The Virgin and Angel of the Annunciation within a vaulted building, beyond which

Figure 5.9 The Annunciation, by Sandro Botticelli (circa 1445–1510).

© CSG CIC Glasgow Museums and Libraries Collections.

is seen a landscape with hills. Golden rays above mark the miraculous passage of the Holy Spirit from God."

If you had to display and interpret this painting, what kind of story would you want to tell? How would you hang and position the painting to help you tell this story? What should the painting be next to, and in what part of the building should it be placed? What furniture, use of colour, or multi-media devices might you employ? What do you want visitors to learn when they see this painting? How might you help them do this? What additional activities and events might you design? What institutional policies for the reading age of the labels and text panels, and their visual presentation, might you need to consult? What terms, or fonts, might you use, or avoid? How will you draw upon accessibility

policies, to ensure that there is enough clearance between exhibits to cater for wheelchair users, or families with buggies? How will you create interpretation for a range of audiences so that visitors with different prior knowledge and motivations can all find something of interest? And which members of staff might you call upon to help you make all these decisions?

We have used this example because between 2003 and 2006, staff at the Kelvingrove Art Museum and Gallery asked themselves precisely these questions, in relation to this artwork (among many others). As part of a major redevelopment, the staff hoped to draw upon the latest thinking with regard to display, interpretation and learning, and to "create an object-based, storytelling flexible museum that shared the wonders of the collection with as wide a range of local people and visitors as possible" (O'Neill 2007: 385). In the end, they displayed Sandro Botticelli's *Annunciation* in combination with a specially designed (and timed) light projection that highlighted the use of perspective. The projection appeared superimposed on the painting to highlight how the perspectival lines centred on the columns in the painting and converged towards a point in the background of the work. The presentation included a voiceover of the subject matter to explain what the viewer was seeing and the presentation was shown again every fifteen minutes. Elsewhere, paintings were hung lower than was usual, and labels were written in "everyday" language – all in the hope of encouraging visitors to spend longer looking at the work (O'Neill 2008: 330).

Many visitors and critics welcomed these changes, but others were furious. An editorial piece in *The Burlington Magazine*, for example, suggested that the new display revealed a "contemptuous attitude" to the collections and described the interpretation as "patronisingly simplistic", and designed to appeal to "the lowest common denominator" (*Burlington Magazine* 2007: 747). In a letter of reply, Mark O'Neill, at that time Head of Arts and Museums, refuted these claims, pointing to the institution's long history of engagement with audiences of all kinds (O'Neill 2008: 330), and not just those already in possession of considerable knowledge.

We have used this example because it makes clear that the act of display always involves always a delicate balancing act. 'New' approaches can alienate existing visitors and vice versa. Yet despite

this risk, many museums and galleries worldwide continue to experiment in order to find more accessible and engaging forms of interpretation. "Cross-departmental approaches" (Whitehead 2012: xii), for example, might equally include curators, learning and marketing teams and exhibition designers, as well as museum guides and volunteers. This allows for a variety of staff to share expertise in order to identify the museum or gallery's key audiences (see Chapter 3), understand who displays and associated programmes should be 'pitched' at, and together develop accessible interpretation, in the broadest sense.

Indeed, some of the latest thinking comes straight from museum history. 'Live interpretation' may be common in museums dedicated to social history, but it is now being employed in museums and galleries of all kinds instead of, or in addition to, wall texts and pamphlets. This is both a reasonably 'new' development and an extension of a practice common at the very beginning of museum history, where wealthy patrons, "prideful of their possessions", would personally "provide all the explanation on offer to those fortunate enough to be invited in for a private view" (Schaffner 2015: 156). Sometimes, 'old' approaches can be made to work for twenty-first century visitors.

CONCLUSIONS

All displays, no matter what their content, make claims about the world. They argue that certain objects matter, that certain ideas, histories and values are important, or that we should see and think about the world in a certain way. As a result, those who work in museums and galleries need to navigate a number of fundamentally ethical and political dilemmas. Which objects should be selected? What kind of display genre might work best? What might an act of interpretation suggest, or conceal? Whose stories should be highlighted, and who should be involved in key decisions? Yet display and interpretation – no matter how well devised – form only part of the story. Visitors are always active participants, even coproducers of displays themselves in some cases. Those who work in museums and galleries need to pay careful attention to the ways that different visitors construct meanings from visitors and engage with displays, or

fail or refuse to do so. These issues are arguably more important than ever as museums and galleries in many countries across the world move "away from a collections-centred identity" and towards more "visitor-centred experiences" (Wood and Latham 2014: 13–17).

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